

Beyond the rhetoric: Teachers' and students' perceptions of student learning in team-teaching classes

Team teaching by local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program has received high acclaim for its role in promoting foreign language education and enhancing cultural exchange. However, we need to critically examine the realities of team teaching beyond the prevailing rhetoric as team teaching affects hundreds of thousands of people and costs a considerable amount of money. I recruited two pairs of team teachers and their students from two public high schools in Japan to explore their perceptions of student learning in team-teaching classes. Data were collected from December 2011 to March 2012 using multiple qualitative methods. The participants had complex, idiosyncratic interpretations of the rationale behind team-teaching classes, the learning goals involved, and approaches taken. The article concludes with a discussion of practical implications arising from this study and of how acknowledging the particular contexts of individual teachers and students can improve team-teaching classrooms in Japan.

日本人英語教諭(JTE)とJETプログラムによって招聘された外国語指導助手(ALT)によるチームティーチングは、主に語学指導と国際交流の分野において各方面から高く評価されている。しかしながら、本論ではその常套句に捉われず、多くの人々に影響があり、多額の費用もかかることを考慮して、現場の教師と生徒達のチームティーチング授業における学習活動に関する認識の実態を深く追求した。データは様々な質的研究手法を利用し、2011年12月から2012年3月に渡って2つの公立高等学校の2組のチームティーチング教諭とその生徒達から収集された。その結果、教師、生徒が抱くチームティーチング授業の学習活動の認識は、複雑多岐に渡り、それぞれが特有の根拠、目的、学習様式を抱いていることが示唆された。本論では最後に、個々の教師、生徒の境遇に重きを置いた、実践的な提言を行う。

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In order to improve foreign language education, Japanese schools have incorporated team teaching—conducted by local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs)—into daily English lessons through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program for more than two decades. The program has received high acclaim for its role in enhancing mutual understanding between Japan and other countries and for being one of the world's largest and best documented exchange programs (CLAIR, 2012; Medgyes, 2001). It is also believed that team teaching has now become an essential part of English education in Japan as it creates a more communication-oriented learning environment (Brumby & Wada, 1990). General comments in praise of team teaching are quite common, such as that by Koike and Tanaka (1995): “Overall, the JET Program has been very successful up to now” (p. 20). These descriptions, however, do not adequately capture the complexities of actual team-teaching activities because they fail to consider teachers' and students' particular perceptions and practices in language learning in their respective contexts. It is thus important for us to closely examine how teachers and students view team teaching in Japan with regard to student learning, and to critically analyze the realities of team teaching beyond the prevailing rhetoric. This study is of significance in particular because it shows there is confusion as to how team teaching contributes

to student learning, and because in the end it provides some ways in which the JET program could be improved. By acknowledging the weaknesses of the program and proposing practical suggestions, this study could help bring about positive changes for the hundreds of thousands of people involved in the program and give a better outcome to the considerable amount of money being spent—approximately ¥26.7 billion a year (Ishii, 2009).

Studies on JTE-ALT team teaching

The pedagogic benefits as well as the drawbacks of JTE-ALT team teaching have been widely addressed. Brumby and Wada (1990), for example, note several benefits of team teaching for students, such as increased authentic interaction and exposure to model conversations in English. Benefits for team teachers such as exchange of cultural information (Tajino & Tajino, 2000) and, specifically for JTEs, improvement of English communicative abilities (Gorsuch, 2002) have also been identified. On the other hand, it has been revealed that there are several challenges due to ineffective communication between team teachers (Moote, 2003) and differences in team teachers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (McConnell, 2000).

Interest for scholars has centred particularly around teachers' perceptions: how they view themselves, their teaching partners, teacher relationships and teacher roles. Mahoney (2004) collected data from team teachers through a nationwide questionnaire and discovered that the participating teachers were unclear about the respective roles of both JTEs and ALTs. Ogawa (2011) similarly examined JTEs' and ALTs' preferences regarding the ALT role and found that the teachers had different, sometimes contrary, expectations regarding ALT duties.

Central to Hiramatsu's (2005) study are the JTEs' and ALTs' perceptions of their team teaching and the factors influencing those perceptions. Her analysis indicated that: (a) the English proficiency of JTEs affected their team teaching; (b) rigid routines were characteristic of team-teaching lessons; (c) there was tension between promoting communication and emphasizing exams; and (d) few opportunities were available for teachers to build collegiality. Miyazato (2009) scrutinized the relationship between JTEs and ALTs by focusing on power-sharing. In her study, which involved two pairs of team teachers, the ALTs were granted full autonomy in the class-

room despite their assistant status, on account of their language abilities. Although less proficient in English, JTEs played an important role as a linguistic, cultural or psychological mediator between ALTs and students, due to their familiarity with the backgrounds and contexts of their students.

Two other studies focused specifically on students' perceptions of team teachers. By using a questionnaire, Tajino and Walker (1998) found that the participating high school students saw JTEs merely as interpreters and ALTs as "authentic" English providers. Through interviews, Miyazato (2012) similarly examined high school students' views of JTEs and ALTs and reported that the students had positive images of ALTs because of their perceived exoticness and the authenticity of their English. However, the students also perceived ALTs negatively, as mere assistants lacking knowledge of the Japanese language. In contrast, the students appreciated JTEs because of their linguistic, cultural, and psychological mediator roles.

As seen here, the previous studies concerning team teaching in Japan have consisted primarily of descriptive explanations about advantages and disadvantages of team teaching and team teachers. In its current state, the literature leaves something to be desired: (a) most studies have looked only at teacher perspectives or only student perspectives; (b) the data collection methods used have almost always been limited to questionnaires or interviews; and (c) the main focus of the studies has not been on student learning. I seek to fill the gap in the literature by examining, through various qualitative research methods, both teachers' and students' perceptions of team-teaching classes, focusing on student learning.

Methodology

The participants in this study were: (a) two pairs of team teachers (each pair consisting of a JTE and an ALT) from two different public high schools in one of Japan's northern prefectures; and (b) 76 second-year students comprising the two classes that each pair was teaching. For reasons of anonymity, the names of the participants and their schools have been changed. The participants provided their own pseudonyms, and the schools were named by myself. Aitani (female JTE in her 40s) and Matt (male ALT in his 30s) worked together at Sakura High School; Takahashi (female JTE in her 40s) and Sam (male

ALT in his 20s) taught at Tsubaki High School. At Sakura, Kanon (female) and Tatsuya (male) were chosen by Aitani as focal students for individual interviews because their timetables were more open than the other students; Takahashi chose Sayaka (female) and Yousuke (male) at Tsubaki for the same reason. The duration of the data collection was from December 2011 to March 2012, and the following data collection methods were used:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews (SI)**—At both the beginning and the end of the data collection phase, the teacher participants and the focal students took part in semi-structured interviews which lasted about one hour each. The JTEs and students were interviewed in Japanese, and the ALTs in English. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. I then translated the Japanese ones into English.
- **Classroom Observations (CO)**—I observed three team-teaching classes at each school. Each of these classes was videotaped.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGD)**—All four teachers and I had three separate discussions in English about their team-teaching classes. Each discussion lasted about one and a half hours and was audiotaped and transcribed.
- **Teacher Journals (TJ)**—Each teacher wrote three journal entries in English reflecting on their experiences with team teaching.
- **Field Notes (FN)**—I kept a detailed record of events, incidents or participants' comments at the research sites.

I conducted a qualitative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of the data in which I focused on the meaning of the participants' comments and behavior in order to identify recurring and/or salient themes. Following the two-step strategy described by Merriam (2009), I first pursued the data of each participant collected over time as a set (e.g., Aitani, Kanon) in order to learn his or her perceptions in a holistic way. I then applied the analytic process simultaneously to different team teachers and/or students to see the possible divergences and convergences of perceptions between the participants (e.g., Aitani and Matt, Aitani and Yousuke). This two-step strategy was interconnected: each analysis affected, and was affected by, the processes and outcomes of other analyses. Several themes emerged as a result of the data analysis reflecting important perceptions the participants had of student learning in team-teaching classes.

Findings

The participants perceived language learning in team-teaching classes as complex and oftentimes contrasting. The following unresolved questions emerged from the data analysis: (a) Are team-teaching classes a meaningful learning opportunity or release time from JTEs' individual-teaching classes? (b) Should team-teaching classes be about testing or communication? (c) Should team-teaching classes always be easy or should they sometimes be challenging?

Meaningful learning opportunity or release time from JTEs' classes?

All the participants valued the presence of ALTs because they were the only native speakers of English in their schools. In this sense, team-teaching classes, unlike JTEs' individual-teaching classes, were seen as a rare opportunity for students to learn native-level English and be exposed to more sophisticated, natural English interactions. Takahashi, the JTE at Tsubaki, commented: "Having Sam in the classroom makes a difference because, immediately, it becomes natural for them [the students] to use English". Sayaka, one of the focal students from Tsubaki, said: "When Sam comes, I feel we speak or write English more". By the same token, the other focal student at Tsubaki, Yousuke, remarked: "When an ALT comes ... our motivation level goes up because they are foreigners". Tatsuya, a focal student from Sakura, considered team-teaching classes to be valuable because he could learn "not only English but also different cultures, unlike the classes taught only by Japanese teachers". For the other focal student at Sakura, Kanon, team-teaching classes were an important learning opportunity because of increased English exposure and group activities: "We just read sentences and translated them into Japanese in Aitani's classes, but when the ALT came, he spoke lots of English and had more group activities. We could discuss a lot with other group members".

At the same time, a few participants sometimes saw team-teaching classes to be a release time from JTEs' individual-teaching classes. For example, when I asked Kanon about her experiences with team-teaching classes from the previous year at Sakura, she replied: "Playing games was the main thing we did when ALTs came". A variation on Kanon's comments was also voiced by Sayaka: "When I was a junior high school student, team-teaching classes

almost always involved games". Later, Sayaka added: "To be honest, I was happy to have team-teaching classes just because I didn't have to take JTEs' classes. I felt the class was easy when the ALTs came because we didn't have to sit in the formal classes". Although these comments were made regarding team-teaching classes in previous years, these past experiences contribute to the students' perceptions and expectations of their current and future classes (see Barkhuizen, 1998). It should be noted that although Sayaka viewed team-teaching classes as a meaningful opportunity in that she wrote and spoke English more during those classes, she nonetheless also viewed team-teaching classes as a release from JTEs' classes. A single participant can thus be seen to hold two seemingly contrasting perceptions.

Based on her experience, the JTE at Sakura, Aitani, reported that some students "regard those team-teaching classes as a time to relax or play around". Sam not only noted that team-teaching classes were somewhat "loose," compared to JTEs' "serious" classes, but also went on to question the extent to which team-teaching classes are a meaningful learning opportunity for students. He made a somewhat controversial comment: "You can get rid of the JET program, and it won't make too much of a difference, based on what kids are learning English [sic]".

The participants generally viewed team-teaching classes as being able to provide a meaningful learning opportunity particularly because of the presence of native English speaking ALTs. However, there are comments which reveal that some participants consider team-teaching classes to serve as a release time from JTEs' more formal classes.

Testing or communication?

The teacher participants were of two minds regarding the learning goals of team-teaching classes—whether the focus should be on testing or communication. There was a general feeling that emphasis on one will necessarily come at the expense of the other. This conundrum was illustrated in comments made by Matt, the ALT at Sakura: "It's complicated.... We have to find the balance between cultivating the ability to use the language and actually using the time and energy wisely to achieve the goal [of increasing students' test scores]". Likewise, Sam was keenly aware that students and JTEs seemed to value test scores more than communicative abilities,

which he thought limited the English conversational skills of the students: "Most of my kids can't sit down and converse with me, not in a way that is remotely close to being comfortable. The problem is all the kids are taught to focus on grammar for tests. That's not communicating". Aitani agreed with Sam's beliefs about student learning, writing in her journal that when we learn a language, communicative practices should be emphasized rather than mechanical rule memorization. Interestingly, the JTE at Tsubaki, Takahashi, remarked: "Actually, I don't care so much about their grammar while I am in the lesson. I just focus on the content and I enjoy their [students'] answers". Despite Aitani and Takahashi both stating that their focus is on communicative practices and content, this was not reflected in their classes I observed. At Sakura, team-teaching classes often dealt with grammar points from the textbook. At Tsubaki, team-teaching classes began, without exception, with quiz sheets for university entrance examinations. This suggests that perhaps the JTEs' concern about students' test scores shaped the way in which they taught even if it was not aligned with their beliefs.

The students also juxtaposed tests and communication when considering their language learning in team-teaching classes. For them, tests scores were the primary occupation and outweighed their interest in English communication skills. For instance, Tatsuya stated: "When the foreign person comes, we can increase the opportunity to actually speak English, but that's not enough.... I want to prepare for tests too". Sayaka was unreserved in describing and providing her opinions about her learning:

Sayaka: Unlike usual JTEs' classes, when Sam comes around, there are many communicative activities. So we don't deal with any grammar points, except briefly in the beginning.

Researcher: Is it bad if you don't learn grammar points?

Sayaka: Not really, but if we think about the tests, we should be making progress in the textbook.

Sayaka was concerned with grammar learning related to the tests and had a somewhat doubtful attitude regarding team-teaching classes involving communicative activities.

What seemed to be at issue was that for the teachers, there was a desire to develop students' communicative abilities, but this was not realized, primarily because of the students' preoccupation with achieving high test scores. Both tests and communication were thus significant issues when it came to the purpose of team-teaching classes in the participants' contexts.

Always easy or sometimes challenging?

Some participants preferred team-teaching classes to be safe environments where students could understand everything easily. Others believed that students should be challenged and sometimes put in difficult positions. On the whole, the JTEs seemed to want to ensure total comprehension on the part of the students whereas the ALTs were willing to challenge the students' limits. For example, Matt described a baffling situation which he found himself in when working with another JTE (not involved in this study):

Sometimes in a class, if I say something, the JTE will immediately translate it into Japanese whereas if the kids had the time to take that in and let me explain that in another way, then they start to understand.... I know from my learning experience that when you are forced or you have no option but to figure something out for yourself, that is the best way to learn.

Similarly, Sam believed that it would be better for the students to be pushed and challenged rather than always guided and supported:

I think it [giving instruction only in English] is definitely something. Maybe at first, it's a lot. But you have to start and choose somewhere. So, each time I'm sure, the more and more they hear it, it would be easier and easier.

During the first focus group discussion, however, Aitani mentioned the difficulty of deciding the timing and extent of using Japanese with her students. She spelled out her feelings about what it means for the students to "understand" in her journal:

At the bottom of this practice [employing translation] is my fear: Students may not understand what is being taught unless they are provided with translation. "Understanding" is a tricky word for me. My mind tells me that understanding of a foreign language doesn't necessarily mean translating it into one's

mother tongue. But my unconscious behaviours easily betray my mind, and often make me end up with acts of translation.... What is the very thing that students are supposed to understand? The grammar, the content of the passage, vocabulary, or the messages of the story?

I noticed that the students at both schools demanded Japanese translation from the JTEs. This was especially evident at Sakura. It seemed that Aitani had no choice but to provide Japanese translation to make team-teaching classes easier for her students. Nevertheless, when Kanon at Sakura was interviewed, she candidly shared her feelings with me:

I don't want my teachers to think like, "oh, maybe this word is too difficult for them, so let's use this word," or anything like that. I want to listen to natural English conversations that can actually be understood in foreign countries.

The evidence suggests that the ALTs are eager to push their students out of their comfort zone and that students like Kanon indeed want to be challenged rather than having their understanding always secured. The JTEs, however, often end up choosing a safe option of translating because of a fear that the students won't be able to cope with uncertainty. In exploring the participants' perceptions of student learning, it is crucial to consider the balance between securing the students' understanding and challenging their learning capacity.

Discussion

The teachers and students in this study had idiosyncratic perceptions of student learning in

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team-teaching classes and complex interpretations of the rationale behind team-teaching classes (whether they are a meaningful learning opportunity or a release time from JTEs' individual-teaching classes), the learning goals (whether the focus should be on testing or communication) and approaches (whether they should always be easy or sometimes challenging).

A notable result of this study is that both the teacher and student participants perceived points of tension. Firstly, they felt the consequences of the incongruence between the JTEs' individual-teaching classes and team-teaching classes. This dissonance can be remedied by making JTEs' classes and team-teaching classes more similar. For example, JTEs could begin including more communicative activities in their usual classes with help from ALTs in terms of activity ideas and class materials. ALTs could also learn how to formally teach grammar and reading comprehension by observing JTEs' individual-teaching classes in order to accommodate students' various needs. Both the team teachers need to reconsider their pedagogy and expand their teaching repertoire in team-teaching classes; playing games disguised as communicative activities should not be the default option. There is no need for JTEs and ALTs to remain confined in predetermined roles. On some occasions, JTEs could lead team-teaching classes with a focus on conversational English; on other occasions, ALTs could organise team-teaching classes paying special attention to tests and grades. Their roles can be adapted according to a number of factors, including: the frequency of the ALT visits, the amount of English the students are exposed to, the timing of exams and tests, the language proficiency of the team teachers, and the desires of students as well as the willingness of teachers.

Secondly, the participants saw a mismatch between what team teaching offers and what high-stakes tests demand. Students' communicative practices of the kind exercised in team-teaching classes are not formally examined beyond the inclusion of listening sections in university entrance examinations. If team-teaching classes are to be more relevant and meaningful, other forms of testing such as oral examinations should also be instituted. This would also encourage JTEs and students to make better use of ALTs both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, where appropriate, JTEs could invite ALTs to both write and mark tests. This could allow test content to reflect the activities used in team-teaching classes and ALTs to gain a

better understanding of their students' learning progress.

Considering the fact that the participants in this study had different and often contrasting perceptions of student learning in team-teaching classes, teachers and students should be given opportunities to share their views on team teaching. Although they do not need to agree on what comprises an "ideal" team-teaching class, these opportunities would enable them to realize how divergent their perceptions are and to acknowledge in their own right how valuable and rare the learning opportunities in team-teaching classes are. For instance, at the beginning of the school year, team teachers could ask students about their background, needs and language learning history through questionnaires. Throughout the year (possibly once a semester), team teachers and students could negotiate and evaluate their team-teaching classes together through interviews or discussions, paying particular attention to the level of difficulty, quantity of English input and optimum use of Japanese in the classroom. I believe these suggestions will help us achieve more effectively the stated goals of the JET program.

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Concluding remarks

This study has shed some light on teachers' and students' complex perceptions of student learning in team-teaching contexts. Each participant had different, yet legitimate, concerns over student learning in their team-teaching classes. Rather than simply praising team teaching in its current form, the perceptions and practices of actual teachers and students in the classes need to be scrutinized. At the same time, attempts can be made by team teachers and students to reconsider, individually and collectively, the impact that team teachers' characteristics, student testing, and their perceptions of team teaching have on their classes. This should be carried out not in order to find and agree on a one-size-fits-all solution, but to explore teaching and learning alternatives and possibilities at a grass-roots level. This can be achieved through various types of questionnaires, interviews and discussions in which the voices of all involved in these contexts are heard. Through these efforts, we will enrich team teaching in Japan and move it beyond the current prevailing rhetoric.

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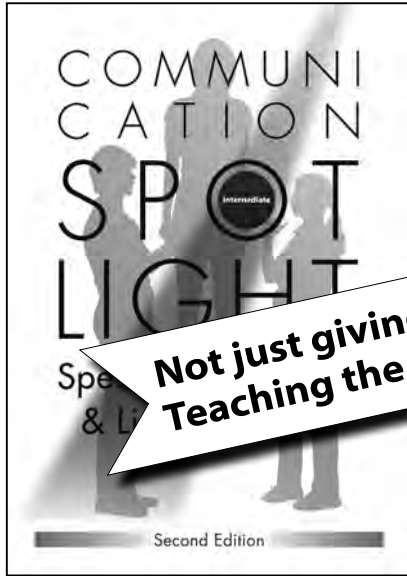


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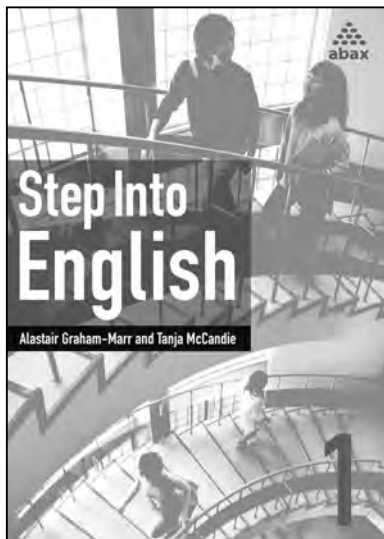


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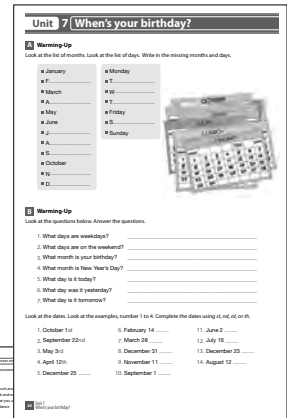
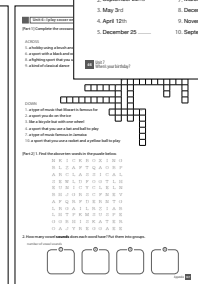
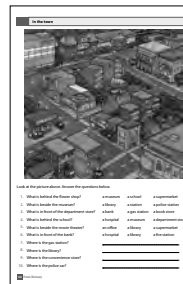


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